

Building a Farmers Market Business

Location of Project: Syracuse, New York (Northeast Region)

Purpose: The Farmers Market Federation of New York and the New York State Department of Agriculture arranged a series of six regional workshops during late February and early March 2001. At each workshop, farmers market representatives from the region were given the opportunity to present a 10-minute presentation about their market. The audience was filled with farmers interested in locating farmers markets where they could sell their farm products directly to the public. The primary goals of the project were:

- Increase the profitability of small family farms by providing training on how to transition into direct farm marketing,
- Allow people to enter into agriculture in a cost-effective manner and with the basic knowledge and skills they needed to be successful,
- Introduce more growers and producers to direct marketing and increase participation in New York farmers markets, and

- Enhance opportunities for consumers to purchase local, nutritious, fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as other agricultural products, from producers.

Accomplishments: The “Building a Farmers Market Business” project began by taking farmers and other interested parties on a series of farm tours during the 2000 growing season. They traveled throughout New York State in an effort to allow everyone an opportunity to visit farms that were using direct marketing techniques, with a special emphasis on farmers markets. The farms chosen for visits represented a diverse array of agricultural operations, including vegetables and fruits, value-added products, livestock and community supported agriculture.

When the tours were completed, the project leaders organized a 2-day workshop to educate transitioning farmers and new entrants to farming about production, business and marketing skills. Topics covered at the workshop included vegetables, small fruit production, greenhouse production, fresh cut flowers and herbs, and livestock marketing. Day two of the workshop was devoted to farmers market issues. Speakers shared information on what a farmer could expect at a farmers market, farmers market demographics, and a discussion on what types of rules and

regulations are typically encountered at a farmers market. One farmers market manager addressed how farm vendors should prepare themselves for selling at a farmers market, and discussed the importance of using tents or coverings, cash boxes, bags, display supplies, and signage. Another manager gave a slide show presentation on market displays, and pointed out the differences between effective and poorly designed displays. A third market manager discussed what extra information a farmer could provide to encourage repeat sales from customers. A Cornell University Extension Associate covered profitable pricing strategies. Finally, members of a consumer panel discussed what they look for from a farmers market vendor. In particular, they discussed what a farmer must do to attract their interest and what factors lead them to become repeat customers. They also explained their reasons for shopping at farmers markets and discussed what types of products were most important to them.

Proceedings for this workshop were collected and put into a binder for each of the attendees to take home. Additional copies of the proceedings are located at the Farmers Market Federation of New York's home office in Syracuse, NY.

Lessons Learned: The farm tours during the summer months were not very well attended, though the tours were only 3 hours in length and took place on off-market days. Several farmers indicated that although they were interested, they could not justify time away from their own farms, especially in light of the cold, rainy spring and summer. However, those that did attend the tours were interested in the details of the operation and asked several questions. Farm owners that hosted each of the tours were very open and discussed good and bad points in their operation and answered questions thoroughly.

The “Building a Farmers Market Workshop” that was held at the 2001 New York State Farmers Direct Marketing Conference was attended by over 120 participants. Seminar presenters were highly knowledgeable in their subject material and presented it in an easy to understand format. Each speaker held a brief question and answer session at the end of his or her presentation to be certain each attendee received all of the information they wanted from the presented topic. Evaluations rated this workshop very highly.

Conclusion: There is a definite need for new farmer training. The average age of farmers participating at farmers markets is increasing and there are too few people interested in replacing these market sellers as

they retire. New farmer training, which should include marketing skills, would help to encourage more people to enter into farming and use direct marketing channels to sell their products.

The Farmers Market Federation of New York will continue to offer workshops and seminars for new farmers and new farmers market sellers. The organization considers it important to continue to bring new producers into farmers markets to ensure that a steady and diverse supply of farm fresh agricultural products is maintained.